



Classroom discourse: How can teachers use their language to have a positive impact upon disadvantaged learners?

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“Pupils who receive free school meals do less well than their peers on every level”

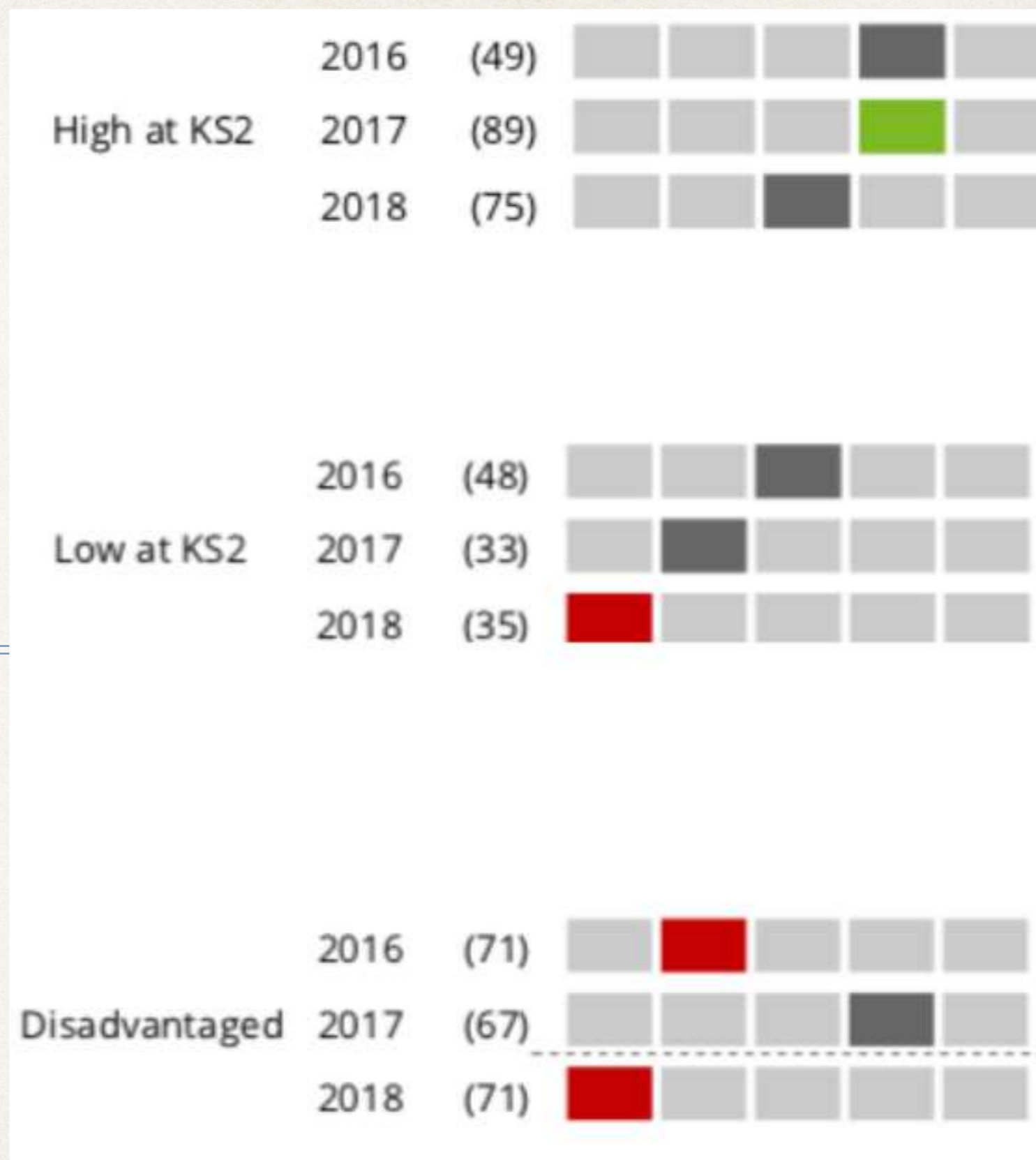
– *Smith, E (2003) Understanding Underachievement: An Investigation in to the Differential Attainment of Secondary School Pupils*

Rationale

- ❖ Higher than average number of disadvantaged pupils at Cheney School (Department for Education, 2018)
- ❖ Attainment and language gap seems to increase as students get older
- ❖ Progress 8 score for disadvantaged pupils significantly lower than higher-attainers
- ❖ Children from low SEC homes have 'less knowledge of language' (Purcell-Gates, 2006)
- ❖ Sophisticated vocabulary imperative for achievement in English Language GCSE (Department for Education, 2014)

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- These quintiles reflect our students' results in comparison to schools nationally.
- Where students who achieve high results at KS2 are in the upper quintiles in comparison to other schools, students from lower-attaining and disadvantaged backgrounds are within the lower quintiles.



- ❖ How does the language gap contribute to the lower attainment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds?
- ❖ What motivates disadvantaged students to want to do well at school?
- ❖ How can teachers use classroom dialogue as a way of addressing the attainment gap?

How does the language gap contribute to the lower attainment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds?

- ❖ We gain much of what we learn from others; our thoughts and actions are shaped by our interactions. Each new generation is influenced by the habits of its predecessors and as much of our learning comes from interactions at home (Mercer, 2002)
- ❖ Dialogue is one of the most valuable tools for learning (Mercer, 2008)
- ❖ Patterns of language are 'culturally determined' (Fisher and Larkin, 2008)
- ❖ The language used at home and the language used within the school curricula can contrast for disadvantaged students (Stockman, 2000)
- ❖ Low SES children may not be sufficiently exposed to an environment in which they participate in activities designed to draw their attention to structural features of language (Locke, Ginsbourg and Peers, 2002)

What motivates disadvantaged students to want to do well at school?

- ❖ Students' educational aspirations in the early years of secondary school are imperative in defining their attainment later on (Khoo and Ainley, 2005)
- ❖ Learning is a social, communicative process (Mercer, 2008)
- ❖ Minds consist largely of internalised habits, strategies and attitudes that are first developed in interaction with other people (Claxton, 2009)
- ❖ A child's home- life influences their attainment and drive to succeed, which is an increasingly prominent feature of government debates of social inequality (Baker et al., 2014)
- ❖ At age 14 there are small, but non-trivial, differences in students' educational aspirations by family level of income (Baker et al., 2014)

How can teachers use classroom dialogue as a way of addressing the attainment gap?

- ❖ Disadvantage within the classroom environment is less concerned with linguistic competence so much as linguistic difference (Fisher and Larkin, 2008)
- ❖ Responsiveness to diversity rather than imposition of 'sameness' in learning and development can enhance academic outcomes (Daniels, 2001)
- ❖ Connecting the curriculum to students' out-of-school lives is a way to engage and improve academic outcomes for all students (Williams and Wilson, 2012)

Methodology

- ❖ Two groups of students interviewed
- ❖ Comparative study between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged focus groups
- ❖ Year 8: a pivotal stage in their development
- ❖ Teacher questionnaire
- ❖ Range of responses from SLT, middle leaders, NQTs and TAs

Focus group 1:

- ❖ “Most of us use slang”
- ❖ “When they [teachers] communicate it clearly and talk to us the way we want to be talked to it makes you wanna do it because you think ‘oh they’re being nice to me’ ”
- ❖ “Some teachers just speak so posh”
- ❖ “Some teachers might be like us”
- ❖ “There’s a high advantage of being posh”

Focus group 2:

- ❖ “From a very young age I listened to audiobooks and I got a lot of language from that.”
- ❖ “I used to say ‘antidisestablishmentarianism’ at, like, the age of seven!”
- ❖ “I personally would just go home and google what they [teachers] said if I couldn’t assume from context”
- ❖ “I think teachers slightly dumb down their language... otherwise, like, twenty hands would go up and ask what it means”

Implications for pedagogy

- ❖ Fully break down complex vocabulary and link these words to cultural references that disadvantaged students will be able to understand
- ❖ Oracy scaffolds
- ❖ Word of the week
- ❖ Literary games
- ❖ Reiterating instructions using simplified synonyms